

How Canyons became the definite article

Expansion, investment and improvements have made this Utah ski area the third largest in the US – and it even boasts a beach, discovers Stephen Wood

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Andy Campbell reckons that he has "an unbelievable job". Few skiers would disagree with him. A former soldier from the UK, he is paid to live in a Utah ski resort, rent-free, and to go skiing. The only part of the season-long arrangement that sounds anything like work is an obligation to blog about his activities, and occasionally to tweet.

When the job was advertised, with a \$40,000 stipend, almost 400 people applied for it. Campbell was hired despite the fact that – being confined to a wheelchair since a climbing accident in 2004 – he wasn't the most obvious candidate.

In the event, somebody else got the job too: although the intention was to make a single appointment, the resort decided that another candidate, the former US ski team racer Kaylin Richardson, was also too good to turn down. So it now has two bloggers-in-residence.

Why the need for all these blogs? Because the resort has undergone an expensive makeover, and it wanted to get that news out to skiers. The announcement of the blogging job generated considerable publicity: hence the large number of applicants. The blogs were intended to keep interest up.

Formerly known as The Canyons, the resort lost the "The" and gained 300 acres of extra skiing during the summer. As a result "Canyons" is now the third-largest ski area in the United States. Other improvements for this season include the installation of a new four-person chairlift with four heated seats, called the Orange Bubble Express because it has an orange-tinted plastic hood to be pulled down in bad weather. Skier uplift has been increased by 47 per cent, and snowmaking capacity has been boosted by the creation of a 20-million-gallon reservoir. Rebranding has given Canyons a new family of san-serif typefaces, and a signature colour: even when you lift up the bubble on the new chair-lift, the outlook is still orange, thanks notably to new signage.

The last – and probably the least – of the elements of the makeover, prompted by the purchase of the resort by the Toronto-based Talisker Corporation, is a brand new beach at the main lift base.

Utah lies to the west of Colorado and has always been overshadowed by its neighbour, which attracts far more US and UK skiers and boarders. But Utah does have a couple of trump cards. Its major resorts lie very close to Salt Lake City, most of them barely an hour from its airport. Colorado's best-known resorts are at least twice as far away from Denver and are accessed via the I-70 highway, notorious for heavy traffic and high passes



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Wide open: At 4,000 acres, the sheer size of Canyons sets it apart

which can be closed by heavy snowfall. Utah's equivalent highway, I-80, is less congested and has no high passes between Salt Lake City and the resorts.

This convenience is compromised, for UK skiers, by the fact that there are no scheduled non-stop flights to Salt Lake City from this country. But then few of us ever get to fly non-stop to Denver because of the high price of BA's unique Heathrow-Denver service.

Utah's other traditional asset is its snow. The state's licence plates carry the slogan "The greatest snow on earth", which is a registered trademark of Utah. Unfortunately, science does not back up the claim. The theory is that Utah's snow is drier and lighter than elsewhere; but when the Department of Meteorology at the University of Utah did research in 2008 at Alta – then judged by US Skiing magazine to be the best place for powder, along with its neighbour Snowbird – it found that the only measurable advantage of Alta over other destinations lay in the quantity of the snow, not its quality.

The famous downside of Utah was its alcohol problem: you couldn't get hold of it, apparently. The problem was always exaggerated, of course. The first time I flew into Salt Lake City, a representative of Utah's tourism organisation met me at the airport, primarily to buy me a drink. In those days, just after the millennium, going out for a glass of wine normally involved becoming a "member" of a bar. That is no longer necessary; and last year a distillery (with a rather good restaurant attached) opened in Park City. Utah has definitely gone wet.

The 2002 Winter Olympics gave most of the Salt Lake City resorts a big boost; nevertheless, Canyons remained something of an unknown quantity. Deer Valley is celebrated for its five-star accommodation and its exceptional grooming; Park City, the venue for the annual Sundance Film Festival, has a genuine old-mining-town atmosphere; Alta and Snowbird, one gnarly and the other sophisticated, are renowned for their deep snow; and Snowbasin, slightly out of the way, has day lodges as fabulous as those at Sun Valley in Idaho, both resorts being owned by the same rich oil-man, Earl Holding. But Canyons? I for one knew so little about it that I hadn't thought to go there until this season.

The sheer size of the ski area sets Canyons apart. The addition of 300 acres on the new ski face on Iron Mountain brings its total of skiable acres to 4,000. But Canyons feels even bigger than that. Riven by valleys running up and down the ski area and diagonally across it, this is not a place where you set off from the lift base with a clear view of what you are about to ski. True, from the highest point, at 9,990ft, most of the area is visible; but elsewhere lift rides and descents tend to reveal the unexpected. Unless they want to ride the gondola, skiers returning to the main lift base from the eastern slopes have to traverse a valley on the bizarre Short Cut lift, a fairground ride which drops down into a valley and then climbs back out of it. Anyone who wanders down the long, meandering Harmony track towards Iron Mountain will casually turn on to White Water because it looks (on the piste map) like a flattish transition on to another gentle descent. It is nothing of the sort. Although rated as a blue run, it is as steep as a racing piste as it plunges beneath a road bridge.

The really challenging, steep terrain is where you would expect it to be, up at the top; and the Murdock Bowl is also set high, a hike up from the top of the Super Condor Express lift. But elsewhere Canyons is elusive. The Super Condor lift runs along a narrow ridge, which falls away sharply on either side like a railway embankment. Many of the runs here are blue, but they are impressively steep all the way down to the boundary of the ski area.

In the centre of the area, where trails wind around the expensive chalets of The Colony, the blues are much gentler: by rights, many of them should be green runs (of which there are very few on the piste map).

Continue further east, and they change character again, twice. On Iron Mountain and the slopes below Dream Peak, there is some of the finest intermediate skiing I have ever come across. Iron Mountain is for the more timid: the heavily forested terrain is gorgeous, and the descents are nice and easy. Off Dream Peak, the slopes are considerably steeper and more open. There are trees, of course: Canyons is blessed with them everywhere

except at its highest altitudes. But here they are thinly spread, in little copses and stands. For an intermediate who likes to ski through trees, this is perfect territory.

Another thrust of Canyons' new management strategy is to improve the on-mountain catering. And on Dream Peak the Cloud Dine restaurant serves light, bright food rather than the rich, fatty staples of most of the skiing world. True, it draws a crowd; but if you have a really good couscous salad and a Tecate beer in front of you, sitting outside is perfectly acceptable, even on a cold day.

You probably want to know about that new "beach". On the snow apron of Canyons' pleasant main lift base there are deckchairs and a couple of tall lifeguard stations (without the lifeguards). With the several food carts nearby, the idea was to create a gathering place for skiers at the end of the day. It didn't look much on a cold, overcast afternoon; but Andy Campbell told me that in brighter weather it was a great place to hang out. For him, a very visible figure in his sit-ski, hanging out has its perils.

At Canyons, most skiers knew about the blogger-in-residence post; and many of them applied. Campbell says: "I do get people shouting at me on the slopes, saying 'Hey, you've got my job; I wanted to do that'."

Feeling some sympathy? I didn't think so.

Travel essentials: Utah

Getting there

* Ski Independence (0131 243 8097; ski-i.com) offers seven nights' B&B in a studio at the Grand Summit Resort Lodge, at the main lift base of Canyons, from £1,389 per person (based on two sharing). The price includes return flights on Delta to Salt Lake City and resort transfers.

Staying there

* The writer stayed at the Waldorf Astoria Park City, 2100 West Frostwood Boulevard, Park City, Utah (001 435 647 5500; waldorfastoria.com). Double rooms start at \$228 (£152), room only.

More information

* Canyons Resort: thecanyons.com

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